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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: AMBASSADOR'S NOVEMBER 23-24 TRIP TO RODRIGUEZ
SAA'S REDOUBT

Ref: Buenos Aires 01618

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Ambassador Wayne, visiting the central Argentine province of San Luis for the first time November 23-24, saw evidence of a provincial government that prides itself on its investment in infrastructure, technology, education, and good governance. Governor Rodriguez Saa, a flamboyant Peronist dissident who took fourth place in the 2007 presidential election, demonstrated his popularity at a sports-car race and offered his hospitality at his private home, which he designed and built from recycled materials. We heard that the Governor's "free Wi-Fi" program for all municipalities was having a positive impact. The visit attracted several consecutive days of strong press coverage. The Ambassador's meeting with local teenagers who will travel to NASA installations emphasized the importance of people-to-people relations, especially among youth, for strong bilateral relations, a message the Ambassador also underscored during a press conference. Rodriguez Saa (reftel) plans to travel to Nashville, Tennessee the week of December 1 to meet with former Vice President Gore to seek the Gore Foundation's assistance on some of the province's environmental programs. End Summary.

Getting to know the Governor

¶2. (SBU) Governor Alberto Rodriguez Saa put out the welcome mat for the Ambassador, inviting him to dinner at his private home on November 23. The Rodriguez Saa family has governed the province since the return of democracy in 1983. (Note: The Governor's brother, Adolfo, served five consecutive terms as Governor from 1983 to 2001, was Argentina's interim president for one week in 2001, and is now a national senator.) The governor finished fourth of about a dozen candidates in the 2007 presidential elections, even though his was a late entry in that race. In a July 2008 poll published in the financial daily El Cronista, he ranked number five out of 23 provincial governors in terms of popularity among his constituents, receiving a 69 percent approval rating.

¶3. (SBU) The Governor and provincial officials expressed pride in their government's accomplishments in building roads (the province is said to have 34 percent of the paved highways in Argentina), providing jobs rather than handouts, and extending free Wi-Fi to all cities, towns, and villages (the words "free Wi-Fi" were painted in bold letters across the car race perimeter wall and on signs in every small municipality we passed through) and over 3,000 laptops for school children -- accomplishments all achieved without accruing significant debt, they emphasized. Minister of Tourism, Culture, and Sports Jose Maria Emer explained the province has achieved these accomplishments without debt in part by maintaining a tight budget and eliminating state expenditures such as government vehicles and cell phones. Separately, Ingrid Blum, the mayor of La Carolina, which is best known for its 200-year-old gold mine, underscored how

free Wi-Fi has changed the lives of her small town's citizens. Traditionally, the whole community had been very isolated from even provincial cities -- now local kids connect with this globe via the internet and thus connect their parents with the rest of the world. San Luis Mayor Alicia Lemme explained that they installed Wi-Fi first in the poorest areas of the provinces. The province also places a heavy emphasis on social programs and investment in youth. Vice-Governor Jorge Pellegrini, a psychologist by training, explained that they are working on a program to enable individuals with psychological problems to live in the community rather than remain isolated in medical establishments. The Governor talked about his efforts to organize youth chess contests across the province and to plant trees bordering all highways (14,000 in the next two months). One tourism ministry employee remarked, "it is a province that always has a new project in the works."

14. (SBU) During dinner with the Governor and provincial officials at the Governor's fabled house that he designed, built, and decorated using recycled materials, the Governor touted the importance of using technology to protect the environment and improve lives. He said the new provincial University of La Punta has a computer program underway that will demonstrate to children how many trees they should plant to offset their energy use at home. The program is intended to complement the government's efforts to plant trees throughout the province.

15. (SBU) The Governor described President Elect Barack Obama's victory as "inspiring," noting it had completed part of Martin Luther King's dream. He stressed the importance of freedom in a democracy, referring to the Mayflower's journey in 1620 to establish freedom of religion and expression and opined that San Luis only just established a freedom of religion and expression law in 2002 (Freedom of religion and expression is guaranteed in article 14 of the national Constitution). He also bemoaned that no foreign

businesses participated in a recent bid for petroleum exploitation in San Luis in part because of the negative investment climate created by Kirchner policies. The Governor said that Argentina's anti-Americanism can be explained in part because the United States assumed superpower status in the 1930s, whereas Argentina's trajectory was the inverse.

The Governor's Dream Child: University of La Punta

16. (SBU) The Ambassador on November 24 visited the public University of La Punta, the pride and joy of its founder, the Governor. The previous day, San Luis Mayor Alicia Lemme, who was briefly San Luis Governor in 2001, had relayed to the Ambassador that the province established the city of La Punta, home to the university and "the first 21st century city," in the middle of Argentina's 2001 economic crisis. With a modern architectural style, the four-year old university reflects the Governor's key interests, boasting a space observatory and offering its 1,000 member-student body a two-year program to prepare for careers in software development, cinema, tourism, and as park rangers.

17. (SBU) The Ambassador met with the University's Dean, Alicia Banuelos, who has a PhD in physics from the University of Buenos Aires and also serves as the province's Minister of Progress. Banuelos updated the Ambassador on the university's close collaboration with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and with NASA. Banuelos relayed that in July 2007 the University signed an agreement with NOAA to collect rain data, which NOAA then incorporates in its global rain map. The map contrasts the data collected on the ground around the world with the information provided by satellites. She also noted that the University has a telescope and an observatory in cooperation with NASA and the European Space Agency. The Dean said the University is also working on the possibility of reaching an agreement with community colleges in the U.S. that focus on techniques devoted to the teaching of math and science at the primary and high-school levels. She said that she attended a meeting with a delegation of Community Colleges for International Cooperation, which visited Buenos Aires in October 2008, to explore the possibility of a cooperation agreement, and will travel to Florida for a meeting of this group with the goal of signing exchange agreements with several

U.S. junior colleges.

18. (SBU) The Ambassador and the Dean also met with eleven high school students, this year's winners of a trip to NASA in a contest organized by the University and sponsored by the San Luis government and private businesses, which is designed to spark students' interest in science and math. During a joint press conference with the Dean, the Ambassador praised the province's focus on investing in youth, highlighted the positive cooperation between NASA, NOAA and the University, and advocated creating more connections between Argentine and U.S institutions.

Engaging with the Argentine Air Force

19. (SBU) The Ambassador visited the 5th Brigade Air Base in Villa Reynolds in the afternoon where he was warmly received by Base Wing Commander Mario Fernando Roca. Roca briefed the Ambassador on the capabilities of his flight wing and gave him a tour of the base which included observing flight planning, simulator training, classroom training, as well as actual sorties (flights). During lunch, the Ambassador and Roca discussed the excellent state of U.S.-Argentine military relations and the Ambassador noted the importance of the ongoing military training and education between the U.S. and Argentina. Roca commended the assistance of Navy Jacksonville in overhauling four A-4 engines and said the Argentine Air Force will be sending additional engines for repair in 2009. The Ambassador also participated in a ceremony to commemorate the unit's heavy loss of life during Argentina's 1982 war with the United Kingdom over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands.

A Visit to a Procter and Gamble Plant

110. (SBU) Later the same day, the Ambassador toured Procter and Gamble's (P & G) diaper manufacturing plant in Villa Mercedes. P & G executives including Director of Public & Legal Affairs Alejandro Lorusso, Government Relations manager Adrian Massaro, and Operations Manager Sabetay Almazlinos briefed the Ambassador on the company's operations and its current challenges. They said the company, which opened its first plant in Argentina in 1991 and today has three plants and one distribution center, is working to expand further. The executives noted, however, that the Kirchner administration's

efforts to control prices and the resulting market distortions, compounded by the global economic crisis, have made growth a challenge. They emphasized that they respect laws and regulations, but suffer from a lack of transparency and communication from the national government.

111. (SBU) The executives also updated the Ambassador on their Corporate Social Responsibility efforts, which include providing support to local schools, hospitals, voluntary fire brigades, and police units. They said that provincial government officials had not supported the company's CSR efforts, responding to invitations by asserting that government was responsible for assisting communities rather than foreign businesses. P & G executives' hope is that next year's launch of a "United Way" project, a joint CSR effort with several U.S.-based companies to include Walmart, Pepsico, Price Water House, Dupont, Dow, and Romer House, will lessen local officials' discomfort with CSR efforts by making the activities more open and less centered on one company, enabling them to work more closely with the local government and NGOs. Operations Manager Almazlinos gave the Ambassador a tour of the plant, which concluded with a briefing by a P & G employee on his participation in the voluntary fire brigade "El Fortin," an association founded in 1961 which P & G assists through funding and emergency training. The plant also has incorporated a very innovative team approach to running the complicated manufacturing line, which has workers fulfilling multiple functions and making maintenance decisions without consulting supervisors.

Public Diplomacy in San Luis

¶12. (SBU) The car race, a first ever international GT race on a brand new San Luis course, proved an excellent photo opportunity for the Ambassador as he kicked off his visit to the province. Governor Rodriguez Saa, Ambassador Wayne, and the race organizer Stephane Ratel were photographed as they walked through the car pits (local citizens called out greetings to the Governor including "Alberto for President.") The Ambassador issued two press releases during the trip, detailing his activities and impressions.

¶13. (SBU) The visit was covered comprehensively in the provincial press. The main local newspaper, El Diario de la Republica, carried stories on three consecutive days on the Ambassador's visit, focusing on the Ambassador's interest in getting to know the province and expanding cooperation in the areas of science and technology. One of the stories featured on the newspaper's front page highlighted the Ambassador's visit to the University of La Punta and his message of cooperation between Argentine and U.S. educational and research institutions. At the University, the Ambassador held a joint press conference with University Director Banuelos, which was covered by ten journalists representing local radio and TV stations. The Ambassador was also interviewed by the University's TV station for a special on the high-school students traveling to NASA. The Ambassador's meeting with the teenagers served as the ideal forum to stress the importance of people-to-people relations, especially among youth, for strong bilateral relations, a message the Ambassador also underscored during the press conference.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The Governor, provincial officials, military leaders, and local residents warmly welcomed the Ambassador and his delegation. The Governor and his staff praised their province's accomplishments, underscoring the Governor's oft-repeated slogan that San Luis demonstrates that "another country is possible." While clearly dominating local politics, the Governor appeared genuine in his desire to improve the daily lives of San Luis citizens, and the province reflects his artistic bent and innovative approach to politics.

WAYNE